

OUR PRISONERS IN THE SOUTH.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO RELIEVE THEM.

Immediate Exchange, or Special Retaliation.

From Our Special Correspondent.

After Salisbury became a receptacle for regular prisoners of war, it was silent like the tomb. It sent back no echo. No man was exchanged from it; few escaped. A few intelligent and trustworthy voices might go up to the North, and tell the condition of those dying prisoners. After our escape, when it seemed impossible that we could all survive the trials and perils which environed us, we promised each other, repeatedly and solemnly, that if any one of us did live to regain home and freedom, he should give to the matter his earliest and most earnest efforts.

We have endeavored, under the solemnities of an oath, to give the plain, simple facts, without exaggeration or coloring, to the Government and the public. That the Rebels are deliberately killing our men by hunger and cold, when they have an abundance of corn and fuel, are truths which cannot be denied. When the prisoners went there, they were newly captured, and, like the most of our soldiers in the field, young men in robust health. Yet, seventy days later we left them dying at the rate of thirteen per cent a month—a mortality which in forty-eight hours would depopulate any city in the world and send its inhabitants flying from it as from a pestilence! And my associate, Mr. Browne, who had the very best facilities for knowing, testifies that out of an average of nearly eight thousand prisoners there were not at any one time five hundred well men—an estimate which the Rebel surgeons frequently and emphatically confirmed, in my own hearing.

Mr. Lincoln's well-known kindness of heart makes him reluctant to adopt measures of severity. But surely it cannot be possible that his strong sense of justice and his peculiarly logical mind, accept for a moment the monstrous proposition: "We cannot as a nation afford to do any inhuman and unchristian thing; therefore we must shut our ears to the agonizing cry which comes up from so many Southern prisons."

The power is in our own hands. We hold the long end of the lever. We have an excess of prisoners, by at least fifteen or twenty thousand. We can exchange man for man, and yet retain Rebels enough to insure the good treatment of any captives, black or white, whom they may take hereafter. It is exchange is impracticable, we can compel them to stop this atrocious and systematic barbarity. If any man believes that we can "afford" to be inhuman and unchristian to the last extent, toward those who wear our uniform and follow our flag and fight our battles, but cannot afford to exercise the least severity toward men whose hands are red with the blood of our bravest and best—in short, that Humanity and Christianity require us to connive at the murder of our own soldiers, then may God mend his guiding eye which comes up from so many Southern prisons!

It is very easy for well-fed and well-clothed Senators, in their warm chamber, to rise up from their cushioned chairs and talk about Humanity and Christianity. I wish they could be prisoners themselves long enough to look at this subject from the other side. I wish they could live awhile among the daily and nightly horrors, which for sixty days surrounded us, and burned into our memories like a hot iron. I wish they could look into those foul pens at Salisbury, which by a perversion of the English tongue are called hospitals; where our poor fellows are crowded upon the cold, naked, filthy floors, without one word of sympathy or one tear of affection; where we give to our dumb beasts; and see their wasted forms, and their sad, pleading eyes. I wish they could wake, at any hour of the night, and hear, on all sides, far and near, that terrible "hack," "hack," "hack," in whose pneumatic tones almost every prisoner seems to be coughing his life away. I wish they could look on the dead cart with its rigid forms, piled upon each other like logs—the stark, swaying arms—the white, ghastly faces, with their dropped jaws and their staring, stony eyes—as it rattles along, bearing away its precious freight, to be thrown into trenches and covered with a little earth. I think a few hours in the stillness of that garison, enlivened by no hilarity or athletic game, broken by no sound of laughter or of song, would change their view of the matter.

I say nothing of the deliberate murders which are so frequent, because they are kindness itself compared with this dying by inches, while the body grows weaker and weaker, and the morbid, vacant, despairing mind preys upon itself until the lamp of life goes out. If there is no early relief in store for those Salisbury prisoners, I believe, before God, it would be mercy to them if their keepers, any morning, were to draw them up in life and shoot them, to the last man.

Mr. Stanton's long-cherished theory—that we can't afford to exchange well-fed, rugged men, for skeletons and invalids—that returned soldiers are ten times as valuable to the Rebels as to us, because theirs, to a man, will be inexorably kept in the army, while the terms of many of ours have expired and they will not re-enlist—is, to characterize it very mildly, a rather cold-blooded one; though it has a certain degree of plausibility. Its adoption has cost us, at the very least, ten thousand lives. If it was essential to success, the country accepts it with bowed head and tearful eyes, as one of the useful sacrifices of the war. But if it was not needful, who shall measure the load of responsibility resting upon its author? If we will not exchange, why don't we retaliate; and if we will not retaliate, why don't we exchange?

Several remedies are inaugurated or suggested; let us see if they are adequate ones.

It is proposed to send Commissioners to the Rebels to investigate and "adjust" the matter. But, in Salisbury, at least, they are acting systematically and with a well-defined purpose. They don't want to adjust it. The ink is hardly dry on the paper, in which the Richmond Government refused to allow Commissioners from each side, to visit their own prisons and report upon their condition. If they found it "inexpedient" for five gentlemen, wholly unconnected with the Government or with politics, and known throughout the world for their moderation, truthfulness, and Christian philanthropy, to learn the secrets of their prison house, does any one suppose they will accept this proposition from Washington, with honest purpose?

It is announced that we are sending blankets and food to our prisoners in the South. Will it require four years more of bitter but uniform experience to teach us that in all such mutual arrangements the Rebels have us at a disadvantage; because, while we may have engagements, they always break them when self-interest requires it? Even if they carried out the arrangement in good faith, our prisoners are nearly all far in the interior. With the utmost endeavors, by telegraphing to and from and stimulating negligent agents, it requires from twenty-five to forty days to send a little package from Richmond to Salisbury by express. The winter would be long past before a blanket or a pound of food could reach the prisoners, and at the present rate of mortality and enlistment in the Rebel army, how many would be left?

Probably some of the supplies will reach the prisoners. It is morally certain that a large portion of them will go to replenish the impoverished Quartermaster and Commissary Departments of the Rebel army. No religious bigot in the days of the Inquisition was ever more true to the injunction "No faith with heretics" than they are to the principle of "No faith with Yankees." Why, I have known our Government, month after month, continue to send by its true-blue boats and tugs of valuable private boxes for prisoners, while the Rebels, not satisfied with their usual practice of stealing a portion under the nose, upon some frivolous pretext or other were openly confiscating every pound of them. At the same time, as I am assured, the returning true-blue boats were loaded down with boxes sent to Rebel prisoners from their friends in the South, and our own express lines crowded with supplies from their sympathizers in the North. And I can only regard the recent announcement that we may send private boxes to friends and relatives in the South as a cruel delusion. One box in six or ten may reach its destination; but the rest will supply officers and hangers-on in Richmond, and thence along the Southern railroads generally, with coffee and sugar at no expense whatever, unless the leopard has changed his spots since the 18th of December.

There is a proposition before Congress to place the Rebels who hold under the charge of returned prisoners from the South. "Returned prisoners" means anybody. There must be at least fifty thousand of them in our military service. Men might be selected from them to command our military prisons, who would treat the inmates with even more lenity than is now extended to them. Then we should get the credit, both abroad and from the Rebels, of retaliating, without any real retaliation. Or officers might be selected who would be guilty of the same undiscriminating cruelties that are now practiced upon our own soldiers—who would starve, and freeze, and shoot in cold blood. That would be precisely one of the really inhuman and unchristian things which we cannot afford to do.

I have witnessed during the war a good many scenes which have thrilled my heart; but since that day when I heard the bells in Mobile ring jubilantly, and the cannon thunder forth the joy of Treason at the fall of Sumter, the best thing I have seen was in the West, upon steamboats conveying the wounded from the field of Shiloh to Northern hospitals. Their long cabins were crowded with cots, where Rebel and Union soldiers were lying side by side, receiving the same comforts and the same ministrations. The ladies of Cincinnati, Chicago and St. Louis, with untiring patience, were washing wounds, combing matted locks, cooling fevered brows, filling the places of absent mothers and sisters, even to their words of sympathy and kindness. They performed the most grateful and the most repulsive duties of the hospital for friend and foe alike. They forgot that the Rebels were enemies, and remembered that they were sufferers. How gloriously it contrasted with the treatment received by our prisoners in the South!

"In that fair day,
When peace sits smiling on our hills once more,"
what shall we look back to with more pleasure than to the labors of those blessed women? I have no fears that we can treat our prisoners in general—especially the private soldiers—too kindly. I have no fears that it will do any harm even to investigate the condition of our military prisons, to correct abuses and punish cruelties, if any exist. And there seems to be some law of nature by which corrupt and cruel men often gravitate into positions of authority about prisons the world over.

But where is the remedy we seek? I believe there are two, and only two adequate ones. The first is an immediate general exchange—not an exchange at the usual rate of official business, which will leave half of our prisoners to die before it reaches them—but one which shall return to us all the Salisbury sufferers within two weeks, and every prisoner in the South within a month.

The other is an immediate special retaliation, not upon the Rebel private soldiers. They belong to the middle and poorer classes of the South, who were never specially hostile to us; who are falling off, more and more rapidly, from the support of the war, who are our only true and trustworthy penmen. Retaliation upon them would be unavailing as well as undeserved. The Richmond authorities are nothing for them, except as they represent muskets, and often treat them almost as barbarously as they do our prisoners.

The Rebel officers are our effective material. Hurt them and Richmond shrieks. Almost to a man, they belong to that class which brought on the war, which controls the war, and which, in spite of all the white-winged messengers between Bangor and Oregon, will continue the war, just as long as they can keep any considerable armies in the field. Submission, for them, means extermination—not as men; but as the controlling political and social power of the South. They will fight now just as earnestly as ever—not with their old, confident expectation of early and complete success, but with a dogged, desperate, Miesau-like hope that, as in the past, so in the future, at the hour of their extremest need, something will turn up in their favor. Let our Government, for example, be able to say to Jeff Davis: "We have selected from your officers in our hands the equivalent, as established by the cartel, for our private whom you hold in Salisbury. We are giving them, as nearly as possible, the same food, the same clothing, the same fuel, and the same shelter. We shall continue to do this until you furnish us satisfactory evidence that you are giving to our soldiers, as far as your resources will permit, the treatment due to prisoners of war."

Will this remedy the evil? There are two precedents which may throw some light upon it. When the Rebels had selected Sawyer and Flynn for execution, our Government did not protest or threaten, but quietly ordered the commandant at Fortress Monroe, the moment he should learn that they had carried out the sentence, to execute Lee and Winder. On that summer morning at daylight, when we learned of this action, one uproarious and spontaneous shout of delight went up from the inmates of Libby Prison. We were satisfied that they would never harm a hair of the heads of Sawyer and Flynn, and they never did.

One day last summer the Richmond authorities received a letter running in this wise: "Learning that you have placed certain negro soldiers of the United States at work on your fortifications under fire, I hereby inform you—what? 'That I protest against it!' No. 'That I propose to appoint commissioners to adjust it!' No. 'That we will retaliate unless you stop it!' No. But 'I hereby

inform you that I have placed an equal number of your officers at work on my fortifications under fire, and shall keep them there till you extend to the negro soldiers the treatment due to prisoners of war. And I have the honor to be, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant, Benjamin F. Butler, Maj.-Gen. Commanding." Before that letter was sent down in Richmond the negroes were put back in Libby Prison, with the other prisoners of war; and they never were placed in the fortifications afterward.

I would not speak dogmatically upon this subject. I know that there are embarrassments attending it; and that no man's *ipse dixit* can afford a certain solution of the problem. But there is no time for delay. Our Salisbury prisoners die at the rate of 13 per cent a month. They enlist in the Rebel army—driven there by hunger and cold—at an equal rate. Aside from all considerations of humanity, as a portion of our military power they are being extinguished at the rate of 25 per cent a month—an argument which even Mr. Stanton must appreciate.

We enforce from the soldier his duty to the Government. When he fails in it we shoot him. Are there those who forget that the Government owes a corresponding duty, and one equally binding, to the soldier—the duty of protection?

If this question is postponed and dallied with, it will be a stain upon the nation's honor, and a needless and inexcusable cruelty to the aching hearts in forty thousand loyal homes. The country expects from the President, from the Cabinet and from Congress, some immediate and effective action. The responsibility cannot be evaded or shuffled off from one to another. If there are any better and wiser measures, in God's name let them be adopted. If not, there is a demand, in tones which ought to be very audible in Washington, for an immediate General Exchange, or Immediate Retaliation in kind upon Rebel officers.

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